

## Lourdes 2011

### **A personal reflection**

When I set off for Lourdes last Sunday, I was not sure what to expect or, indeed, what to hope and pray for. At that time, I was stepping into a pattern which has been mine at this time of the year for the last 40 or so years.

My first pilgrimage was in 1968 when I went with students from Oxford University, where I was chaplain, and we went as a working group. In addition to my normal priestly responsibilities, I worked with the students at the railway station, the airport and in the baths as a helper and as a brancardier. I continued to go with Oxford in this way until I left the university to take up other work in 1977, though I did continue my pilgrimages after that in a less structured way.

In 1981, I went with the Catholic Association (Clifton diocese) for the first time and this year has represented my 30<sup>th</sup> pilgrimage with the Association, though, since 1989, I have been a member of the Portsmouth diocesan group. As I am now nearing retirement, this is almost certainly my last pilgrimage for the time being.

As this year's pilgrimage unfolded, I began to realise that everything was different and that my "pilgrim history" was radically changing. For the first time in 45 years, I was one of the sick of the pilgrimage. Although I seemed quite well, I was aware of my energy levels diminishing and of my increasing dependence on the love and care of others.

For the first time in my life, I received the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick at the hands of Archbishop Peter Smith. It was given publicly at the Mass of the Anointing, which formed part of the pilgrimage programme, and I found myself enfolded and cherished with so many others who were receiving the Sacrament, as well as being one of those also ministering to the sick sacramentally.

This led me to further reflection and prayer. Previously, I had always been able to bring to the pilgrimage my personal fitness and energy to help others and now the tables were turned.

For the first time – and I have really had to struggle in prayer with this – I was bringing a gift from the Lord which was not of my choosing. I was bringing the gift of my cancer and I think that I have really been graced in these days to see that it is a gift and not a burden. Like all the gifts that come from God, it is not always easy to see where they are leading. All I can say – and it's early days yet – I feel that I am being led into a new vision and way of life brought about by retirement and serious illness. I do not know where it will take me but I have been graced enough so far to be able to discern the hand of God in all this and a new phase of my life beckons me forward. For once, God is doing all the choosing and I am finding myself content for that to be so.

I don't know where I will be this time next year – Mells, I hope – or how I will be but I find myself very peaceful about all that may transpire. I am being given the possibility of a much-needed moment of conversion and transformation for my whole life and I am being given the grace of time in which to achieve what God wants.

This way of thinking – seeing cancer as a moment of grace – which must seem crazy to most of us, began to crystallize in my heart as we celebrated the feast of St Rose of Lima on the Tuesday of the pilgrimage. In particular, I was struck by some words from her writings when she says that there can be no road to heaven without the cross. I cannot know what the Lord has in store for me – and part of me doesn't want to know – but I am being graced with the beginnings of an understanding that I am now going to be led in his path and in his ways – which are not ours!

I have a feeling and the strong hope that what lies ahead will be extraordinary and transforming and not in my control. If this can be the grace of sickness, then blessed be God! My illness is to be gift to me and, although there will clearly be times when it feels much more like burden and weariness, I am being called to live positively, optimistically and with hope and I want nothing more than that. This has got to be the Christian way.

I fancy that the Lord's words to Peter as recorded by John will increasingly be my companions in the days, months and years to come:

“In all truth I tell you, when you were young you put on your own belt and walked where you liked; but when you grow old you will stretch out your hands and somebody else will put a belt round you and take you where you would rather not go...follow me.” (John 21:18)

So, even after 43 years of pilgrimages to Lourdes, this one was new and with renewed faith I can hear afresh what Our Lady says: “do whatever he tells you”. All I can say is “Amen” to that. Thank you all so much for all your love, your prayers and your care which have enabled me to be where I am and have given me such strength and hope as I have.

To end on a rather more prosaic note, on my return from Lourdes I received a letter from the hospital and an appointment to see my consultant on September 12<sup>th</sup> when I hope I will be able to give you more definite news about the future.

**Bishop Crispian**  
**29<sup>th</sup> August 2011.**